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THE INDIAN OCEAN AS A GEOSTRATEGIC REGION:  
RECENT EVOLUTION, STATUS, AND PROSPECTS

An Individual Study Project

by

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# ABSTRACT

AUTHOR: Inderjit S. Sawhney, Brigadier, IN

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*Keywords: India, East West relations; Balance of power. (EDC)*

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## INTRODUCTION

Whoever controls the Indian Ocean dominates Asia. The ocean is the key to the seven seas. In the 21st century the destiny of the world will be decided on its waters.

- Alfred Mahan

The deeply perceptive and almost prophetic vision of this great American naval strategist, Alfred Mahan, expressed a century ago signifies the importance of the Indian Ocean region. The statement when made was perhaps related to the control of the sea at its surface. However, technological advances force us to see the thought in a multidimensional context which extends to the depth of the ocean as well as to the space above it. In the horizontal dimension the littoral states of the region become key actors, hence the relevance of the region as opposed to the ocean by itself. Today, as we approach the threshold of the 21st century, the Indian Ocean region emerges as one of the most significant regions in the world due to its geological, political, economic, and strategic characteristics.

With withdrawal of the British forces from the ocean in the late 60s, the myth of a "power vacuum" in the Indian Ocean was born. The British withdrawal was followed by increased presence and activities by Western alliance members. Soviet countermoves were virtually inevitable, increasing the extent and operational scope of external forces in the region, thus leading, in the view of this writer, to greater potential for instability. It was in the seventies that the Indian Ocean acquired attributes which subsequently caused it to be identified as a separate region attracting international interest and making it a source of conflict and rivalry. The oil price hikes in 1973-74, the Arab-Israeli War of 1973, the Iranian revolution, the Iran-Iraq war, Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, and other regional issues have been responsible for catalyzing interest and action that transformed a not-so-significant

region into a region of significance and challenges. The net result of efforts by the superpowers to maintain and, if possible, enhance their influence in the region has been a spiral of superpower rivalry and turbulence affecting the regional powers. This has transformed the security environment and increased the region's volatility.

The world has also witnessed tensions and instability in various states of the region, most of which belong to the developing Third World. Some of the countries have attempted to diffuse these tensions with a view toward improving the security environment through nonalignment, regional cooperation, adherence to the United Nations charter, proposals like the Indian Ocean "Zone of Peace," and support for "Naval Arms Limitation Talks." But success has eluded these attempts. With the passage of time the environment has deteriorated, thereby inviting serious analysis of the current situation and prospects for the future.

Our study of the evolution of the region to its present circumstances will concentrate on developments from 1968 to 1988. This 20-year overview should provide the background for understanding the region. Recent events like Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, cessation of the Iran-Iraq War, and rapprochement between the two superpowers portend the relaxation of tensions in the region. The whirlwind of momentous events in the Soviet Union and Eastern Europe has brought the balance of power into a state of flux. The rapidity of change is a serious challenge to any forecasting when the present is so fluid and uncertain. Notwithstanding all these limitations, a speculative look into the future will be attempted.

## GEOPOLITICAL AND STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE

The geopolitical importance of the Indian Ocean is better appreciated by looking at the world map on a globe rather than at the usual Mercator's projection on flat paper. The ocean is spread between the longitudes 20 degrees E and 120 degrees E. Four significant facts of geopolitics stand out in relation to the Indian Ocean. An analyst states that:

- o All countries of the Indian Ocean littoral (with the exception of Australia and, according to some analysts, South Africa) belong to the underdeveloped/developing categories. They also constitute the vast majority of the nations of the Third World. These Third World countries are characterized by two facts:

- oo They were, with few exceptions, part of the colonial empires of West European Nations for large portions of the 19th and 20th centuries, till they were freed, by peaceful means or otherwise, from colonial rulers in the decades 1940-1960.

- oo They are nascent nation states. Their vulnerabilities and instabilities are heightened by their underdeveloped status. They have aspirations and frustrations arising out of the mirage of the benefits of development on one side and the shackles of economic backwardness on the other. They all suffer from the trials and turbulence of transition from traditional civilization values to those demanded by industrial economies in the nuclear age.

- o Access to the ocean is either through two northern narrow "choke-points"--Suez Canal/Horn of Africa and Singapore/Straits of Malacca--or through two southern border "gateways" at the southern extremities of Africa and Australia. The southern Indian Ocean, in fact, provides the shortest distance between the Pacific and Atlantic Oceans.

- o Beyond the littoral states, the landmass to the north is dominated by the Soviet Union and China, two Communist powers hostile to each other and at ideological conflict with the Western world. Of these, the Soviet Union, as a superpower, has been in a state of conflict with the United States, the other superpower. In strategic terms, the Indian Ocean region constitutes the soft underbelly of the Soviet Union which has severe limitations on its ability to reduce its vulnerabilities.<sup>1</sup>



o The region contains many useful natural resources, of which oil is of special significance particularly to the industrialized West and Japan.

It was not until the 1970s that the Indian Ocean acquired the attributes which subsequently identified it as a separate region attracting international interest as an arena of conflict. This transformation of the region into a zone of conflict stems essentially from two basic issues--first the geostrategic importance and geopolitical imperatives of the region, particularly access to oil, and second the superpower rivalry or competition in the region to influence the geostrategic factors in favor of their respective interests.

Two-decade-long efforts by the superpowers to maintain and if possible enhance their influence in the region led to a spiral of superpower rivalry. The post-war split enabled outside powers to pick proxies in the area and inside factions to pick protectors. Many states of the Indian Ocean littoral and hinterland have, over the post-war period not only got further estranged from each other, but have also developed deeper linkages with outside powers. The pattern of interrelationships among the regional powers, and between the regional powers and outside powers, determines the basic issues of peace and security in the Indian Ocean today. The oil states with their enormous and growing resources have the capability to purchase the most modern and sophisticated arms. This concentration of arms in such a strategically important area can be a complicating factor in attempts to achieve regional security.

## SUPERPOWER PERCEPTIONS AND RIVALRY IN THE INDIAN OCEAN

The superpowers' rivalry in the Indian Ocean has been a part of their global confrontation in varying degrees. This confrontation in turn is the outcome of the conflict of their national interests. Their superior military, technological, and economic capabilities are the main instruments that have been used to maintain and further their positions in different areas of the world. Both of the superpowers use their armed forces as a discrete foreign policy instrument to achieve specific objectives at particular times as well as on an ongoing, everyday basis.

As Majid Akhtar has said,

while it is true that the two superpowers have an antagonistic relationship, and that no decisive turn in international politics is possible without participation of either of the two, or both, it would be a simplistic view of the international political scene if one looked at this reality simply in terms of 'superpower politics'--as a world engulfed in a struggle for hegemony between the two. The rivalry between the two is not because these two decidedly mighty nations are super, but because they represent two alternatives for the world.<sup>2</sup>

### The U.S. Policy Posture

During and immediately following the Vietnam War, the United States was reluctant to undertake major initiatives to fill the so-called "vacuum" created by the British withdrawal from "east of Suez." But with events of the late 1970s and 1980s, the United States entered the Indian Ocean region in a big way.

Taking advantage of the conflict between China and the Soviet Union, the United States has now devised the strategy of building a new balance of power against the Soviet Union, on the basis of an accommodative Sino-U.S.

relationship thus leaving Southeast Asia for China to take care of, with Washington concentrating on South Asia, Southwest Asia, and West Asian regions, according to one Indian analyst.<sup>3</sup>

#### The Soviet Policy Posture

According to the same analyst, the Soviet Union's policy is to support the cause of national independence of erstwhile colonies and to strengthen the forces of anti-imperialism. Since the countries, engaged in the tasks of socio-economic emancipation, have generally been anti-imperialist, there has emerged a solid basis for cooperation and friendship between them and the Soviet Union. The Soviet effort, therefore, is to prevent the expansion of U.S. influence in the developing countries, and the task has become all the more important in view of the growing Sino-U.S. collusion.<sup>4</sup>

#### The Indian Ocean and Superpowers' Perceptions

Why is the Indian Ocean important for the superpowers? Normally the importance should have been confined to trade and commerce, in the growth of which, Indian Ocean routes play a significant role. But in the context of ideological conflict between the two superpowers, the Indian Ocean has acquired political significance. The United States sees the Indian Ocean as a factor in her strategy to maintain friendly influence with the newly independent nations in the region. The Soviet Union, on the other hand, finds in this strategy of the USA, a direct threat not only to the security and independence of littoral countries, but to her own security interests as well. In the worldwide conflict between the United States and the USSR, the Indian Ocean occupies a crucial position as it provides access to many sensitive areas of the world.<sup>5</sup>

## THE UNITED STATES

Political Objectives. U.S. political interests relate to two important goals. The first objective is limiting Soviet influence, or undermining it wherever possible. The second objective is to support friendly regional countries and to ensure that the political status-quo should be maintained in states where substantial U.S. interests are involved.<sup>6</sup>

Security Interests. U.S. security interests in the Indian Ocean are interlinked with American security interests in the other important regions of the world. The security networks developed in the Indian Ocean, though designed to ensure regional security interests, are capable of supporting U.S. strategic objectives in the Pacific and the Mediterranean. The U.S. force structure, facilities, and doctrines have been constructed to achieve two mutually reinforcing security objectives: first, security against Soviet pressures and, second, security against a variety of regional threats ranging from domestic turmoil in a friendly country to intra-regional conflict which threatens the security of friendly states.

Economic Interests. Oil is the life blood of modern industrial societies. The importance of Middle East oil by itself is marginal to U.S. requirements. It is the friendly West and the Far East that need this oil, and the United States has to protect their interests. In addition to the energy security of allies, American multi-national corporations have substantial capital investments in Persian Gulf oil production, transportation, and sale in the world market. Another matter of great economic interest is America's large-scale transfer of conventional arms to the Indian Ocean region. Finally, the United States imports many important minerals from the most volatile areas of

the world, thereby raising fears of disruption of critical minerals and energy supplies.<sup>7</sup>

#### Evolution of U.S. Strategy

The closure of the Suez Canal in 1967 and the decision by the British in 1968 to withdraw all their bases from the region resulted in greater U.S. interest to have its presence in the region and to restrict the influence of the Soviet Union. To function as an effective sea power in the region required access to facilities on the littoral and its periphery. The politico-military linkage between the great powers and the regional powers has to be seen in this context. Following the Nixon Doctrine of aloofness, Washington relied more on the Navy and Air Force and on its regional allies such as Japan and Australia which it was hoped would contribute economic assistance to the underdeveloped states of Asia. The souring Vietnam commitment was the underlying reason for reduced political involvement in the littoral states. But subsequent events saw greater U.S. involvement in the region. In 1971, the India-Pakistan War resulting in creation of Bangladesh brought tension between the United States and the Soviet Union. The United States moved a portion of its Seventh Fleet into the region as an instrument of coercive diplomacy against India. The Soviet Union responded with support for India. During this time there was a commonality of approach between the United States and China. Nixon's visit to China in 1972 was aimed at consolidating a relationship with China with a view to containment of the Soviet Union. The energy crisis of 1973-74, in the wake of the Yom Kippur/Ramadan Middle East war, focussed attention on the oil supply from the Persian Gulf, a high priority for Western countries.

United States interests revolve around the need to ensure access to Persian Gulf oil for itself and its allies. The magnitude of American

dependence on Gulf oil has never been as great as that of western Europe and Japan, which approximated 75 percent and 90 percent of consumption respectively, at the time of 1973-1974 embargo. The most portentous result of the embargo was not the damage to western economics (which was considerable), but the serious bickering and backstabbing that occurred in the Atlantic alliance as NATO partners and Japan scrambled for favored access to unembargoed oil and for future access to Arab oil. A sustained denial of Persian Gulf oil to the West is an eventuality that the United States is therefore keen to avoid for reasons of alliance solidarity as well as economic health, a fact underlined by the Carter Doctrine and development of the Rapid Deployment Force.<sup>8</sup> Arab states were prepared to join the front against Israel and use oil as a weapon. But Iran continued to remain central to U.S. strategy for the region, and it proved particularly helpful at this juncture by refusing to be a party to the oil boycott. Saudi Arabia subsequently adopted a similar approach, and her relationship with the United States improved. From the early 1970s Iran and Saudi Arabia became the "twin pillars" of U.S. policy in the region. The United States realized that even the moderate Arab states would disapprove of American support to Israel. In addition to the oil embargo, the difficulty encountered by the United States during 1973 was in moving supplies to Israel. Secretary of Defense Schlesinger announced in December 1973 that U.S. Navy vessels would visit the Indian Ocean regularly and that the naval presence would be more frequent than in the past. The United States decided to create an independent force structure with greater credibility and reliance resulting in greater interest in expansion of Diego Garcia.

The year 1979 marked the beginning of a series of crises--the revolution in Iran, Soviet intervention in Afghanistan, American hostages in Tehran, and,

then, the Iran-Iraq War. These events subsequently influenced U.S. strategic planning for the northwestern parts of the Indian Ocean, which reflected a strategic evolution in America's global posture.<sup>9</sup> The Soviet intervention in Afghanistan strengthened the view that detente had failed to restrain the Soviet geopolitical offensive in vulnerable areas of the Third World. This renewed suspicions about Soviet intentions in the Persian Gulf. Having "lost" Iran, Pakistan assumed greater importance in the United States perception, resulting in a massive \$3.2 billion six-year package deal with Pakistan to provide economic assistance and allow the transfer of F-16 aircraft and other defense equipment. In March 1986 another agreement of \$4 billion was approved.<sup>10</sup> In 1980, the Carter Doctrine was enunciated and stated that the United States regards the Persian Gulf and Southwest Asia as most important and any attempt to gain control over it by some other power would be thwarted even if by military force. This added a new dimension to the United States Indian Ocean strategy and resulted in formation of the Rapid Deployment Force, which has since been reorganized under a new "Central Command" (CENTCOM).

The Diego Garcia facility has been improved by a series of programs to provide multiple communications, surveillance, and support facilities for the United States forces in the area. Diego Garcia is a coral atoll 13 miles long and 4 miles wide. It lies near the center of the strategically important northern half of the Indian Ocean at a distance of approximately 1000 miles from the southern tip of India. Beginning in 1981, 2000 million dollars over a period of five years was earmarked for the region to ensure the desired buildup.<sup>11</sup> At the United States Naval Base on the Island of Diego Garcia, the RDF now maintains 17 giant military container ships loaded with enough

tanks, rocket launchers, and amphibious armored personnel carriers to enable 12,500 U.S. Marines to fight for 30 days without resupply.<sup>12</sup>

Air and sealift capabilities have also increased the mobility of United States forces in the area. The United States has successfully negotiated increased access to ports, airfields, and other facilities with Egypt, Kenya, and Somalia, in addition to the existing facilities in Oman and Bahrain. Newly acquired facilities will improve U.S. ability to sustain naval and aircraft deployment in the area. A more important ingredient of this strategy is the periodic rotation of one carrier battle group from either the Pacific or Mediterranean Fleet. Since the eruption of twin crises in West Asia (1979), the United States has amassed superior naval power in the area, which also provides an immediate tactical air capability.<sup>13</sup>

#### THE SOVIET UNION

Foremost among Soviet interests is a preoccupation with the maintenance of stability on its borders and a measure of influence, if not control, over its neighbors. This standard dimension of Soviet behavior has been clearly manifested in its relations with the states of eastern Europe, but it also has relevance throughout Soviet Asia where ancient cultural and ethnic traditions tend to undermine Moscow's political authority and to create natural communities of interest with people outside the Soviet Union. The Iranian Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War have been particularly worrisome to Moscow because they could give rise to unstable or anti-Soviet regimes on the border.<sup>14</sup>

Political Objectives. In the political context, Soviet naval diplomacy is directed almost entirely towards the Indian Ocean littoral states. In the post-Stalin period the bipolar character of the international system, cold war



rivalries, Western threat perceptions, and an element of pragmatism together added new significance to Soviet policy towards the Afro-Asian states. The Soviets attempted to counter the Western containment policy by initiating political and diplomatic offensives in the Indian Ocean region. In this regard, Soviet support for nonalignment became a central theme in Afro-Asian policy.

Admiral Gorshkov, the chief exponent of Soviet naval strategy, emphasized utilization of the Soviet Navy as a foreign policy instrument of the Soviet state. The Soviets maintain that the aims of this utilization policy differ from the aims of "imperialist" powers. According to Admiral Gorshkov, the Soviet Navy is an instrument of a peace-loving policy, of the friendship of peoples, of a policy of suppressing the aggressive aspirations of imperialism, of deterring military adventure, and of decisively countering threats to the security of peoples on the part of imperialist powers. Whatever the rationale, the Soviet entry into the Indian Ocean has become an important political factor.

Economic Interests. Economic interests are central to superpower presence in the Indian Ocean. The Soviet Union has nonmilitary marine interests in the region, and thus the Indian Ocean assumes an important position in Soviet economic calculations. Apart from a large volume of trade with India, the Soviets are constructing a huge steel plant in Pakistan and have completed a thermal plant. Iraq, South Yemen, Ethiopia, Kuwait, and Iran also figure prominently in Soviet economic relations. The Indian Ocean is also vital to the Soviet Union's communications network, providing an all weather link between the far eastern provinces and the Black Sea.

Strategic Interests. The Soviets have regarded their navy as a vital instrument for projecting power. Apart from its relation to the Soviet desire for global parity with the United States, the Indian Ocean has acquired strategic importance for the Soviets on account of the potential presence of hostile submarine-launched offensive systems. With the increasing use of missile and nuclear warheads, the Indian Ocean forms the soft underbelly for the Soviets and thus is central to Soviet strategic considerations. In addition, the Soviet Navy deployed in the Indian Ocean can take on targets in China.

#### Evolution of Soviet Strategy

Due to its geographical location the Soviet Union has always perceived itself as an Asian power and has made efforts to influence that area so as to keep Western influence away. In 1969, Brezhnev proposed a collective security system for Asia, in conjunction with a plan launched around the same time by Kosygin for the creation of a zone of economic cooperation between the Soviet Union on the one hand and Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India on the other. It had diverse aims in a long term strategy against China and the West as perceived enemies of Asian security: to establish the Soviet Union as an Asian as well as European power; to alter gradually the economic and social conditions in the area in its favor; to secure a corresponding influence in controversial Asian issues; and finally to put an end to China's and Japan's territorial claims against it.

The Soviet Union had a critical upset when Egypt broke its relations with Moscow and in 1976 revoked their bilateral treaty of friendship. The Sudan also changed direction after an abortive coup in 1971 in which the Soviet Union had been implicated. Saudi Arabian influence moved the Arab Republic of Yemen away from Soviet influence, and, at the time of the reopening of the

Suez Canal in 1975, the strategically significant area around the Red Sea was largely free of Soviet dominance. Soviet efforts to make Iraq a regional partner replacing Egypt were not totally successful. But Soviet backing for Iraqi nationalization of its oil installations and a friendship treaty in 1972 were followed by the granting of Iraqi permission to Moscow to use airfields and port facilities in the Gulf harbor of Umm Qasr.

The year 1979 brought very significant developments. "Islamic Revolution" in Iran led to increased interest in the Gulf region and new alignments. The Iran-Iraq War in 1980 led to further polarization. The Soviet Union's geographical proximity to the area gives it a natural advantage. Loss of U.S. influence in Iran created greater interest on the part of the Soviets to have a pro-Soviet Iran, although Moscow realizes the difficulty of that objective. In the Gulf Region, as in the Arab world at large, the United States position regarding Israel stands in the way of the overriding aims of the Arabs, and the Soviet Union consequently continues to have a political advantage on that account.

The Indo-Pak War in 1971 brought the Soviet Union and India closer to each other as Pakistan was being supported by the United States and China. As a reaction to the American naval task force centered around the aircraft carrier "Enterprise" in the Bay of Bengal, the Soviet Union reinforced its Indian Ocean fleet, thereby at least symbolically demonstrating its support for India. Indo-Soviet cooperation also proved itself in the United Nations when China, represented in that organization for the first time, adopted a position in line with that of the United States in the Security Council and yet was unable to avert an Indian victory over its ally Pakistan.

The Horn of Africa and Red Sea region also underwent change during the 1970s. Egypt and Ethiopia, the two most populous and important states there,

oscillated widely in their alignments. Their strategic location at the intersection of two continents and important sea routes, was the traditional reason for the rapid growth in outside interest in the internal and interstate events there. This has particular bearing on the flow of oil through the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and the Suez Canal. During the 1970s, pro-Soviet governments, or those prepared to adopt socialist development models, were in power in the Sudan, South Yemen, Somalia, and Egypt. Erstwhile pro-West Ethiopia was also brought under the influence of the Soviet Union. But Egypt and the Sudan changed and became pro-West. In July 1974, Moscow concluded a friendship treaty with Somalia with extensive rights to use its military facilities, but Soviet assistance to Ethiopia eventually soured Moscow's relations with Mogadishu.

In 1979 the Soviet Union intervened in Afghanistan and sent in a large number of forces and weapons. The United States perceived this as a great threat to the Gulf, and consequently increased its military capability. The Soviet Union eventually withdrew from Afghanistan, but only after the heightening of tension resulting in superpower rivalry in the region.

#### REGIONAL PERSPECTIVES

Since the 1970s many events have occurred with major impact on the situation in the region. Consequent to the repressive policies followed by West Pakistan, East Pakistan rose in revolt and, with the help of India, the new nation of Bangladesh emerged. This created serious conflict between India and Pakistan. Egypt, Ethiopia, and Somalia switched their linkages with the superpowers between 1976-1977. In 1978-1979, Afghanistan, Iran, and Pakistan witnessed fundamental changes in domestic and foreign policies. In Pakistan, Bhutto was removed and a new military regime took over with closer ties to the

West. Consequent to the death of the military ruler Zia, Benazir Bhutto, daughter of the late Zulfiqar Ali Bhutto came to power after elections in 1988. Since then she has been struggling to see democracy function and to perpetuate her own stay in power. Events in Afghanistan, resulting in massive Soviet military intervention in the country, are too well known to require recounting. Iran saw the downfall of the Shah and emergence of the fundamentalist Ayatollah Khomeini. Prolonged war between Iran and Iraq saw both superpowers exerting their influence with a view to gaining access and advantage. Domestic and foreign policies of most of the states in West Asia have undergone changes. Due to the perceived threats to Arab regimes from the forces of so-called Shia fundamentalism many Arab regimes have been drawing closer to the West, especially to the United States, despite their differences over the Arab-Israeli rift.

#### The Regional Response

Competition between the superpowers has generated tensions and conflicts in different parts of the region. The littoral states, in answer to the escalating situation, formed the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) in 1964 and recommended that the Indian Ocean area be made a denuclearized zone. But at the end of the 1960s, U.S. efforts to establish a base in Diego Garcia, movement of the Soviet Navy into the Indian Ocean, and the supply of arms by the British to South Africa under the Simonstown Agreement of 1970, together induced the NAM to pledge to work for the adoption of a declaration by the United Nations on the Indian Ocean as a "Zone of Peace" and for the exclusion of superpower rivalry and competition from the region. Simultaneously, many states sought to negotiate treaty arrangements among themselves and with the superpowers in an attempt to ensure peace, security, and stability in the region.

Since the 1950s both superpowers had been pursuing policies aimed at securing influence in the region by means of multilateral and bilateral treaties with the littoral states. The Central Treaty Organization (CENTO) and Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO), which gave rise to many misunderstandings, were finally dissolved in the second half of 1979. The ANZUS Treaty was a security pact among predominately "white" states (Australia, New Zealand, and the United States), and its significance increased after the British pulled out of Asia. The Soviet Union's Collective Security System for Asia met with a generally negative response, but Moscow managed to enter into bilateral treaties of friendship and cooperation with some of the littoral states, including South Yemen, Afghanistan, India, Iraq, and Vietnam. The United States concluded bilateral agreements with Pakistan, Oman, Kenya, Somalia, and Egypt. Although the purpose of these treaties is similar for both the superpowers, their application and their character have been different. The NAM has been an important rallying ground for the superpower treaty partners. The varied and often mixed policies of the superpowers, however, failed to ensure the requisite peace and stability in the region as they were mainly aimed at further increasing their own influence in the region, and this prompted the littoral states to conclude several treaties among themselves for regional cooperation and security, e.g., Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Organization of African Unity (OAU), Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), etc., thereby reducing their dependence on the superpowers.

#### Effect on Regional Security

After 1968 and until recently, the interest and military presence of extra-regional powers have been on the increase in the Indian Ocean,

particularly in the western part, which in turn increased the demand for more bases and facilities.<sup>15</sup> These forces have been partly deployed against each other and partly against some of the littoral states. Such military presence with its vast destructive capability potentially constitutes a grave threat to the regional peace and security.<sup>16</sup> The small island nations are deeply concerned about their worsening security environment. Certain islands like the Comoros, the Seychelles, Bahrain, and the Maldives, whose policies have been marked with a series of coups and counter coups in the past few years, are afraid of destabilization. Most of the island states do not have sufficient and adequately equipped armed forces to defend against possible threats from radical, fascist, or mercenary militant groups, sometimes supported overtly or covertly by a big power. The islands could be overrun before assistance could arrive from the United Nations, friendly powers, or neighbors and allies. Recent events in the Maldives have amply demonstrated the vulnerability of these small states, specially those in comparatively isolated locations and therefore more open to external intrusion. The Maldives, Mauritius, and the Seychelles are all on the main sea lanes cutting across the Indian Ocean. Their geostrategic importance seen in the context of geopolitical and economic vulnerabilities creates additional problems of security.

Soviet and American policymakers apparently viewed the Indian Ocean as a "vacuum" area after the British withdrawal and decided to move in to provide security and stability in the absence of viable regional arrangements. But the deployment of naval forces was more in line with their respective self-defined national interests than with a desire to promote peace. The transformation of the Indian Ocean region into another zone of superpower naval deployments has acquired greater significance in light of the fact that many regional states might be tempted to seek close military collaboration

with one or the other of them. Of equal note is the apprehension that the proximity of friendly superpower forces might tempt some regional powers to involve themselves in local disputes. In conflict situations, the superpowers have tended to use their military presence to support their client states--the United States presence to augment Israeli capabilities during the 1973 War and the Soviet sea and airlift during 1977-1978 to bolster Ethiopian defense are cases in point.<sup>17</sup> From New Delhi's perspective, Pakistan has been armed much beyond its needs with the stated aim of strengthening it against the Soviet Union after the latter's entry into Afghanistan. Now that the Soviets have pulled out, the surplus weapon inventory may tempt Pakistan into taking a military initiative in the region.

The security of the region is also likely to be affected by the naval power of China, and another major actor joining the game is Japan. China plans to create a force of at least twelve nuclear-missile-armed submarines to provide it a nuclear second strike capability. The limited range of its SLBMs may dictate a deployment in the northwest Arabian Sea to provide a serious and credible threat against the Soviet Union.<sup>18</sup> A sizeable portion of Japan's requirement of oil and other important raw material comes from the Indian Ocean region and almost half of its maritime trade passes through the Indian Ocean. Japan's interests in the region therefore are vital.

The region has been surrounded on all sides by nuclear-weapon powers engaged in continuous proliferation of nuclear weapons, vertically, horizontally, and spacially. A space tracking station in Diego Garcia is becoming a reality. As it is an important link in the command, control, and communication system of the United States, the possibility of the Indian Ocean being used in support of the strategic defense initiative (SDI) and anti-satellite warfare exists. The possibilities of Indian Ocean-based aircraft



using miniature homing vehicles to destroy satellites in their low orbits over the southern ocean and American nuclear submarines firing their "popup" missiles to destroy Soviet ICBMs during their boost phase using high energy beams of various kinds in the Indian Ocean have been envisaged.<sup>19</sup>

New uncertainties with regard to availability of land-based naval and air force facilities, particularly in uninhabited and sparsely populated islands in the Indian Ocean are increasing. The increased sending of nuclear plants into outer space by the superpowers has resulted in the threat of nuclear debris from satellites falling over the ocean islands and littoral states and the consequent hazard of radiation to human habitation and danger to shipping, fishing, and other activities in the region.

The introduction and use of neutron bombs in the Persian Gulf region is one scenario the strategists of the West are envisaging because of the weapons' inherent characteristics of annihilating the human beings and the advantage of keeping the vital oil installations intact. Use of the Rapid Deployment Force (RDF) in conjunction with air power raises the possibility of even unintended use of nuclear weapons in an accident or by misreading of command messages. Besides the direct use of military force, there are possibilities of the external powers operating in the Indian Ocean as suppliers of arms to insurgents and political actors of the region. Thus, the increased military presence of outside powers adds to instability in the region.

Given the international system dominated by rivalries and competition in an adversary relationship between the United States and Soviet Union, divergent political cross currents among the nations of the region appear in sharper focus. But unlike the European-North American system of clearly drawn lines of alliances and hostile bloc frameworks, the countries of the Indian

Ocean region do not share threat perceptions as uniformly as developed industrial nations do among themselves. The local and regional discords and disputes, in fact, become heightened due to great-power strategies aimed at each other as well as directed toward exercising influence and control over the countries of the region, an overwhelming portion of which belong to the underdeveloped/developing "Third World."<sup>20</sup>

#### THE INDIAN OCEAN AS A "ZONE OF PEACE"

The naval deployments of both superpowers in the Indian Ocean have been a long-term cause for concern for the littoral states. The Zone of Peace concept as it evolved till 1971 was to isolate the Indian Ocean from the growing rivalry, and therefore the increasing presence, of outside powers, and if that were not practical, at least to restrict it. A resolution was passed in the United Nations on December 16, 1971 seeking to ban the deployment of nuclear weapons in the Indian Ocean. The resolution referred to this area as the new arena of superpower rivalry, hoped for the elimination of superpower rivalry from the area, sought protection against the threat of the use of gunboat diplomacy by the superpowers, and argued for the freedom of navigation in the area.<sup>21</sup>

Over the years, two core areas of disagreement have emerged in attempts to arrive at an acceptable framework for creating the peace zone. One is the proper scope of the term "Indian Ocean," and the other is the extent of obligations of the superpowers and regional powers. There is also a wide gap between the views of the NAM and the superpowers. While the superpowers consider expansion and intensification of armed conflicts within and among states of the region to be the foremost challenge, the non-aligned countries emphasize the danger due to military presence of superpowers as the primary

issue. Today, the United States sees no reason why it should give up its presence in the area and claims not only its right to be present to protect its vital interests in the area, but also sees no serious challenge either from the regional powers or other outside powers. As for Soviet perceptions, peace in the Indian Ocean is directly linked to American willingness not to use this waterfront as a strategic threat to the Soviet landmass.

#### CURRENT STRATEGIC ENVIRONMENT

The geostrategic imperatives, great power politics and actions, intrinsic vulnerabilities of the developing countries situated on the Indian Ocean littoral, and propensity of many of these countries to seek tactical advantages in the region through linkages and strategic consensus with great powers, have thus combined to seriously degrade the security environment of the region.<sup>22</sup>

Some recent events in the region have brought about significant changes which have the potential to improve the security environment. The Soviet Union has pulled its forces out of Afghanistan. This is a definite improvement considering that Soviet entry into Afghanistan had heightened the superpowers' rivalry in the region, leading to increased militarization and volatility. The Iran-Iraq War that eventually drew in the superpowers has also ended. With the newly emerging democracy in Pakistan and increase in the frequency of talks between India and Pakistan on some issues that have been irritants between the two, there is hope of improvement in their relations, though the Kashmir issue is heating up again as of this writing.

The superpower rapprochement consequent to the Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan and the negotiations to reduce forces in Europe have been very significant developments which raise the hope of reducing tensions globally in

the tense cold war that has prevailed since World War II. Europe has been central to the cold war and to the containment policy of the West. Policy changes within the Soviet Union i.e., "Perestroika" and "Glasnost," have brought about a sea change in the politics of that country which has also had an effect worldwide. The Eastern European political landscape is changing with a rapidity that defies the imagination and the ability of analysts to keep up with events. The pressure for openness, democracy, and change in economic policies seems to have suddenly opened the lid of a steaming pot.

The collapse of old regimes and the astonishing changes underway in the Soviet Union open prospects of a Europe of cooperation in which the Iron Curtain disappears, people and goods move freely across frontiers, NATO and the Warsaw Pact evolve from military powerhouses into merely formalities, and the threat of war steadily fades. Events also raise the question of German reunification, an issue for which politicians in the West or, for that matter, Moscow have yet to formulate strategies. Recently at Ottawa a "2 plus 4 approach" was agreed upon, i.e., the two Germanies and then the four war-time allies, namely the United States, the USSR, Britain, and France, should decide on the modalities. Finally, should protest get out of hand, there is the risk of dissolution into chaos, sooner or later necessitating a crackdown and, possibly, a painful turn back to authoritarianism.<sup>23</sup> With Moscow's satellites finding their own way, a new architecture must be created for the heart of the continent. But no one is sure of the blueprint.<sup>24</sup>

In October 1989 Soviet Foreign Minister Edward Shevardnadze announced that the Soviet Union is willing to negotiate an end to NATO and the Warsaw Pact and is prepared to eliminate its own overseas bases by the year 2000. The Malta Summit between President Bush and Gorbachev in December 1989 has strengthened the hope of final reconciliation. The world is thus passing

through a critical and very significant period. Rapprochement between the two superpowers, which together exert a considerable influence on world events, brings renewed hope of a more peaceful world with reduced force deployments and reduced tensions. These are essential ingredients for greater stability. The rapidity of change, however, forbids making any confident forecasts.

The world environment largely depends on the relationship between the two superpowers, as many other nations in the world play their cards in harmony with their supporting superpower due to various linkages. The rapprochement between the two superpowers, while now confined largely to Europe, should lead to reductions in tension the world over. In spite of all the magically fast-emerging scenarios which may change the shape of Europe, it is not likely that worldwide force deployments will change so drastically as to remove the chance of conflict altogether. The absolute uncertainty of events is forcing both superpowers to move cautiously and with suspicion of each other. The director of the CIA has been quoted as saying on December 2, 1989 that with the increase in the number of Soviet visitors in inspection teams, etc. espionage has increased. It is safe to assume that a similar flow in the opposite direction has occurred. On the first day at the Malta Summit, a Soviet proposal asking the United States to reduce its ships in the Mediterranean was turned down. While the Soviet Union is a landpower and is located close to its allies, the United States has a vast ocean between it and its allies and therefore has to rely on its sea power. Applying the same logic, the possibility of demilitarizing the Indian Ocean seems less probable than many optimists would hope.

Powers on the either side of the great East-West divide already agree that the world's "center of gravity" of politico-economic activity is shifting to the Asia-Pacific region. This implies that the forces of competition,

rivalries, and the struggle for influence and control are also likely to increase in these regimes in the years ahead. Maritime power and the use of the seas will likely constitute an important element in the pulls and pressures around the new center of gravity.<sup>25</sup>

#### SPECULATIVE LOOK AT THE FUTURE AND PROSPECTS

Even though Europe, long central to the superpower conflict, is in a state of flux, and momentous events are taking place with astonishing rapidity, it is fair to assume that there is a great likelihood of "peace breaking out" the world over with resulting improvement in the international security environment, notwithstanding the invasion of Panama and the like. The cold war between the two superpowers is drawing to a close. Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, cessation of the Iran-Iraq War, and the decrease in the significance of Persian Gulf oil are all positive indicators. In fact, the reasons for gradual increase in tensions in the Indian Ocean region since 1968 seem to have disappeared or considerably diminished. It is an opportune time to de-escalate tensions in the Indian Ocean by reducing military deployments of the superpowers.

With the passage of time, the nations of the Indian Ocean region, which have had approximately 40 years in most cases to develop and stabilize, have attained reasonable experience with regard to international affairs. In most cases the states of the region, because of their peculiar uncertainties, relied heavily on linkages with the superpowers. The superpowers were thus drawn in in the name of maintaining stability of the region, though their presence actually served their respective national interests more than the interests of regional states. This was detrimental to mutual cooperation and trust which is essential to stability in the region.

There is now a greater understanding of the need for peace in the region which is essential to national development and progress. This greater understanding is visible in the way various moves towards cooperation among the states have been taken. The Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), and Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) are some of the prominent examples. Even though some of these groupings (with the exception of the GCC) are not directly related to security concerns, it is important to note that cooperation in any field is an essential prerequisite to fostering trust and mutual confidence eventually leading to security and stability in the region. These cooperating designs are likely to lead to greater interdependence and understanding and to remove the fears of the smaller states. The so-called fears of the smaller states in the region do not always result from original thinking of the states concerned, but sometimes have become tinted as seen through the eyes of the superpowers who for their own perceived interests create these fears in the minds of these states.

India in its own right is emerging as a regional power, and this is often mentioned as matter of growing concern to neighboring states. This has often been done by interested powers to create fear so as to make these states dependent. If a power vacuum is the rationale for the superpowers to rush in, it should legitimately be India that fills up that vacuum as the British controlled the region from India. India's growing power has resulted from following a political system and increasing its industrial strength through technological development. Its need to become militarily strong results from the threat India has faced from a big and nuclear power, China. India has no hegemonic designs. All conflicts with Pakistan were Pakistan's adventures, largely the creation of its military regimes. History stands as evidence that

no undue harm has been brought upon a smaller neighbor by India. In fact, India sacrificed a great deal in helping its neighbors such as aiding the liberation of Bangladesh, responding to the request of Sri Lanka in solving her ethnic problem, and securing the legitimate government in Maldives. Seen dispassionately, growth of each of the states big or small is largely dependent on mutual cooperation. In today's world of interdependence, mutuality of approach is not limited to the Indian Ocean region but extends to the world as a whole. However, greater dependence on actors in closer proximity has obvious advantages. It is fair to assume that with the improvement in superpower relations there is an increasing possibility of improvement the world over.

Having realized the futility of intervention in Afghanistan, the Soviets are not likely to repeat an adventure of this type in the region. The United States had speculated that the Soviets might enter the Indian Ocean through Pakistan or Iran and this pushed the United States to evolve the Carter Doctrine and to increase militarization of the region. Improvement in Indo-Pak, Sino-Indian and Sino-Soviet relations should move the region towards greater understanding and cooperation and a reduction in regional tensions. Some of the existing movements and organizations could then move towards security arrangements providing for greater stability. There are a large number of states in the region, and it is hard to imagine that all of these would come together towards a collective security arrangement. But reduced superpower presence with subregional security arrangements would be a first step toward the final pullout of outside powers.

The United Nations, in spite of its limitations and the differing views on its effectiveness, has certainly contributed towards peace and stability in the world. In fact the effectiveness of any such organization depends on the



intent, behavior, and contribution of its members, especially the big powers. The superpowers and other growing powers have an important role to play in the U.N. and to influence formalization and implementation of accords and agreements. One repercussion of the Soviet intervention in Afghanistan was the abandonment of efforts to stabilize naval force levels between the superpowers in the Indian Ocean. It is an appropriate time to reconsider Naval Arms Limitation Talks (NALT). The initial premise of the NALT discussions was that it was in the interest of both superpowers to reduce the potential for confrontation in a region of relatively low strategic importance.

The superpowers' interests in the region have prevented the implementation of the Zone of Peace proposal. The superpowers and some other maritime nations have consistently rejected the Zone of Peace concept, arguing that it implies some sort of legal regime which would restrict the rightful passage of their warships in international waters. However, this is something of a red herring designed to stall debate on the concept. The total removal of superpower instruments of power projection from the Indian Ocean, in spite of all the favorable developments, does not appear likely in the foreseeable future. The United States feels that in order to neutralize the Soviet Union's advantage of proximity, it has to keep its sea power in the region. In fact, some people argue that consequent to the reduction of arms and elimination of the confrontation in Europe, the superpowers may concentrate greater power in the Indian Ocean region. This is further supported by the logic that the shifting of the economic center of gravity to the Asia-Pacific region may invite greater rivalry in the Pacific and the Indian Ocean region. But the current situation in Europe and general superpower rapprochement suggest that the heat generated by the rivalry in the other regions is likely

to reduce. Now that the main contest is seemingly over, and the desire of the Soviets to seek assistance for improving their internal situation dictates cordiality of relations, the atmosphere is conducive to reduction of rivalry in the Indian Ocean as elsewhere.

The diplomatic efforts by superpowers, littoral states, and the United Nations Ad Hoc Committee on the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace should be reactivated as a confidence-building measure leading to demilitarization. At the time of writing this, no one could have imagined the events in Europe that occurred during the past year. No one could imagine the currently changing scenario a year ago. Who knows the shape of things to come? An Indian Ocean Zone of Peace and resulting stability in the region may be feasible in the near future.

Soviet withdrawal from Afghanistan, the end of the Iran-Iraq War, the changing political landscape in Europe, efforts by both the superpowers for reduction of military strength and weapon systems, the recent release of Mr. Nelson Mandela in South Africa together constitute credence that the world is moving towards reduced tension. The superpower rapprochement is likely to result in a more peaceful environment the world over. It is for the regional powers now to take an initiative to work for regional cooperation, which is essential to stability, so that superpower indulgence in affairs of the Indian Ocean region is reduced.

# ENDNOTES

1. Jasjit Singh, "The Indian Ocean - Future Challenges," Indian Defence Review, Vol. IV, 1985, p. 20. The fourth factor regarding the resources has been added by the author of this paper.
2. Majid Akhtar, Indian Ocean: Conflict and Regional Cooperation, New Delhi: ABC Publication, 1986, p. 58.
3. Ibid., pp. 62-65.
4. Ibid., pp. 65-66.
5. Ibid., pp. 67-68.
6. Rasul B. Rais, The Indian Ocean and the Superpowers, London: Croom Helm Ltd., 1986, p. 58.
7. Ibid., pp. 64-67.
8. William L. Dowdy and Russell B. Trood, The Indian Ocean, Perspectives on a Strategic Arena, Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1985, p. 397.
9. Zbigniew Brzezinski, Power and Principle: Memoirs of the National Security Adviser, 1977-81, New York: Farrar, 1983, p. 454.
10. Rais, p. 52.
11. Dieter Braun, The Indian Ocean, Region of Conflict or Peace Zone? New York: St. Martin's Press, 1983, p. 46.
12. Selig S. Harrison, "Cut a Regional Deal," Foreign Policy Magazine, Vol. 62, Spring 1986.
13. Rais, p. 53. It is however assumed that consequent to cessation of the Iran-Iraq War and rapprochement with the Soviet Union, some of the naval power may have been reduced.
14. Dowdy and Trood, p. 398.
15. Jasjit Singh, "Ensuring Security in the Indian Ocean," Indian Express, 12 November 1988, p. 8.
16. "Indian Ocean: Global Strategies and Space Warfare," USI Journal, October - December 1984, p. 308.
17. Rais, pp. 154-155.
18. Jasjit Singh, "Pacific - Indian Ocean Region: The Strategic Imperatives," IDSA Journal, Vol. XIV, July-September 1986, p. 164.

19. R. R. Subramanian, "Superpower Conflicts in the Indian Ocean of the 1980s," Strategic Analysis, January 1985, pp. 978-979.

20. Jasjit Singh, "Pacific - Indian Ocean Region: The Strategic Imperatives," p. 153.

21. K. R. Singh, "Emerging Issues in the Indian Ocean," IDSA Journal, Vol. IX, April-June 1985, p. 393.

22. Jasjit Singh, "Indian Ocean - Future Challenges," p. 23.

23. Time Magazine, 20 November 1989, p. 26.

24. Time Magazine, 6 November 1989, p. 48.

25. Jasjit Singh, "The Indian Ocean - Future Challenges," p. 24.